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Exploration of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships in the Online Context of VIPKID

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Exploration of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships in the Online Context of VIPKID

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore how VIPKid teachers build positive relationships with students in their unique online context. I began by establishing the need, importance, and nature of positive teacher-student relationships. I included the results of a survey given to 36 VIPKid teachers in order to better understand the perspective of these teachers on positive relationships with students, what barriers these teachers face in building relationships, and what techniques they employ to build relationships. I found that the results imply that in order to build better relationships with students, VIPKid teachers must communicate care for their students despite barriers they may face.

Keywords: teachers-student relationships, online

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Exploration of ESL Teacher Techniques in Building Positive Relationships with Students in the
Online Context of VIPKID

Chapter I: Introduction

Through the use of technology, I am able to be an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher to children in China with the online educational company VIPKid. When I began working with VIPKid in early 2016, I was one of less than 1,000 teachers. As of early 2018, VIPKID has “more than 30,000 teachers and over 200,000 paying students” (Conboye, 2018). Indeed, “VIPKid has seen explosive growth as Chinese parents seek out high-quality education for their children, particularly in English” (Bloomberg News, 2017). I have witnessed much of that growth in my own time with VIPKid.

Over these two years, I have had the privilege of teaching English to hundreds of Chinese students ages 4 to 12 years old. The classroom is set up to allow maximum engagement in a virtual setting (see Appendix B). The student and teacher are able to see and speak to one another through live video feed. They are also able to communicate by typing in a chat box. The lessons are taught through interactive slides on which the student and teacher can draw to interact with the slides. The students watch videos and participate in activities and quizzes before class in order to prepare. This flipped classroom model enables the student and teacher to focus on the application of language skills during each 25-minute class session. The focus of these lessons is to reinforce content learning, to clarify areas of confusion, and to allow students opportunities to practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing English. The student-teacher interaction is an important aspect of the learning model with VIPKid. While information about the language may be transferred through videos and activities before class, the teacher is responsible “to stimulate, to engage, to involve, to facilitate, and to be there as a resource” (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 105). The

one-on-one context allows students to apply their language learning in conversation while receiving undivided attention, targeted guidance, and constructive feedback from their teacher.

Because the VIPKid is designed to be a one-on-one learning context, I wanted to explore the techniques teachers use to build relationships with their students. I also wanted to discover what barriers prevented teachers from feeling positively connected with their students. While there is an abundance of research on teacher-student relationships, VIPKid is a new educational platform that brings unique challenges and considerations to this area of research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gather teachers' opinions about positive student-teacher relationships and to explore their efforts to build these relationships with their students in the online educational context of VIPKid.

Research Questions

1. How do teachers build positive relationships with students in the online EFL context of VIPKID?
 - 1.1. What barriers do teachers encounter when building positive relationships with students in this context?
 - 1.2. What techniques or methods do teachers use to overcome these barriers and build relationships with their students?
 - 1.3. What are the perceived results or benefits for teachers and students who have positive relationships?
 - 1.4. Do TESOL-trained teachers view relationship building with students differently than teachers who are untrained?

Chapter II: Literature Review

The Nature and Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships

From the introduction to formal education in kindergarten to the culmination at high school graduation, positive relationships between teachers and students can have the far-reaching, long-lasting benefit of directly and propitiously impacting student achievement in grades K-12. One study (Hamre & Pianta, 2001) found that “early teacher-child relationships, as experienced and described in kindergarten by teachers, are unique predictors of academic and behavioral outcomes in early elementary school, with mediated effects through the eighth grade” (p.634). Research also showed that positive teacher-student relationships could be a safeguard against drop out, could impact student motivation and attitude toward learning, and could influence student success in academics (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). The antithesis was also true with poor or conflictual teacher-student relationships negatively impacting student engagement, academic achievement, and peer socialization (Hughes, 2011). Positive teacher-student relationships can also benefit the teacher as they can provide motivation and energy to invest more meaningfully in the success of the student (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). These relationships can “inspire teachers’ work and give them a deep sense of purpose” (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013, p. 46). These relationships both “drive and define the meaning of teachers’ work and can be pivotal to student success” (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013, p.46).

A positive teacher-student relationship is a caring relationship. The teacher cares about the students’ well-being not only academically, but also emotionally, socially, physically, and spiritually. The teacher is warm and welcoming, gives respect and support, and communicates empathy and understanding. Teacher-student relationships are critically important to the success

of learners. The development of these positive relationships should be prioritized as an integral part of educational endeavors. In this review, the author will explore teacher-student relationships in different educational contexts in order to better understand the practices of teachers in the specific context of VIPKID.

Variables affecting Teacher-Student Relationships

Context. For the purposes of this paper, the word *context* encompasses several factors. Context not only refers to the pedagogical setting in which the teacher and student meet together, but may also influence the educational objectives, mode of lesson delivery, or duration of class time. Others considerations would be the age of the learners, their language level, or their purpose for studying English. Because VIPKid teachers work with children, we will not consider adult educational contexts in the scope of this paper.

In the mainstream K-12 classroom. The task of building positive teacher-student relationships in the traditional classroom setting offers both challenges and rewards. Establishing relationships in the classroom can be difficult. Because “both teachers and students navigate complex networks of relationships constrained by rigid schedules, high student-teacher ratios, curriculum mandates, and testing practices” (Stewart, 2016, p. 23), teachers may struggle to connect and nurture relationships with each student. With the focus on standards and high-stakes testing, teachers feel they spend too much time preparing students (Center on Education Policy, 2016) which can add pressure and stress to both teacher and student. One must also consider the personal, affective influences such as personality, circumstances, or conflicts that may also act as hindrances in building relationships. Nel Noddings (2005) encourages teachers to consider the “real, pressing needs” of their students such as “homelessness, poverty, toothaches, faulty vision, violence, fear of rebuke or mockery, sick or missing parents, feelings of worthlessness” (p.151).

These needs may must be considered in order to facilitate both learning in the classroom and positive relationships.

Challenges exist in this context, but traditional classroom teachers also have advantages to creating positive relationships. Interacting with students for extended periods of time, knowing their students' histories and educational backgrounds, and being acquainted with the family of their students can all aid the teacher as foundations on which to build relationships. These factors can also help the teacher to better understand and meet the needs of the student which can contribute to a more positive relationship. Teachers in this setting may also connect with students through extracurricular activities such as clubs or sporting events.

In the ESL classroom. The ESL classroom presents new challenges to overcome in addition to those experienced the mainstream ESL classroom setting. English language learners and their teachers are most likely “separated by a chasm of cultural, linguistic, experiential, and socioeconomic differences” (Stewart, 2016, p.22). These differences may make the building of positive teacher-student relationships more difficult, but the importance of the task should not be diminished because “the existence of positive relationships inside the classroom is considered as possibly one of the most influential factors in language learning (Sánchez, González, & Martínez, 2013, p. 117).

Stephen Krashen's hypothesis on second language acquisition, The Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), states that the affective variables of motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety can negatively influence a student's ability to acquire a second language. Therefore, the ESL teacher must strive to build positive relationships with the students in order to create a low-anxiety learning environment in which the student is able to build confidence and motivation. When teachers and students have positive relationships, the affective filter is more

likely to be lower because students understand that their teachers care about their well-being and success.

Positive student-teacher relationships can also help motivate English language learners. According to one study (Yunus, Osman, & Ishak, 2011), ESL students show more classroom engagement and focus despite boring or difficult language input when they have a high-quality relationship with their teacher. Research (Jiménez & Rose, 2010) also suggests that meaningful teacher-student relationships in the ESL classroom can improve the quality of instruction. Teachers in ESL classrooms should strive to “learn more about students, about their communities, and about their cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (Jiménez & Rose, 2010, p.406).

In the online classroom. In the modern, technological era, education can and does take place over the internet. Students and teachers are able to connect and interact in virtual classrooms. This virtual interaction can add yet another dynamic to building positive teacher-student relationships.

Although students and teachers in online classrooms do not have the advantage of meeting regularly in person, these settings offer multiple venues in which to interact and communicate. Teachers and students may use discussion boards, videos, e-mail, and assignments to interact. In this setting, both the quantity and quality of the interactions matter (Zelihic, 2015). Teachers can increase the quality of interactions in this context by creating opportunity for social and personal exchange, being available to respond to student needs and questions, and giving timely, appropriate feedback which can aid the understanding and academic development of the student (Bruster, 2015; Leibold & Schwarz, 2015).

Environment. Environment is distinguished from context in that it refers to more than the logistics of the teaching situation. A class environment is a “relational and behavioral climate” (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013, p.20) that is conducive to building positive relationships. “A climate in which caring relations can flourish should be a goal for all teachers and educational policymakers” (Noddings, 2012, p. 777) because first and foremost students are people with needs and emotions that must be addressed. Students who feel safe, cared for, and connected to teachers do better academically, socially, and emotionally in school (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Hughes, 2011; Hughes & Wu, 2012). Regardless of context, teachers should work to make their classrooms environments in which students are comfortable, respected, and valued. Teachers are responsible to ensure that interactions in the classroom “foster relationships and create a safe space for holistic development” (Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016, pp.91).

Culture and Language. Educators in today’s world must be interculturally competent and multiculturally aware. They should seek to understand how culture can influence their students’ perspectives on learning. Teachers must also learn to “recognize that each of their cultural perspectives is one of many that are legitimate” in order to “create an inclusive classroom environment where cultural differences are an asset to the learning community and each individual” (Medina-López-Portillo, 2014, p. 334). In any context, teachers may have the privilege of engaging students whose culture is different from their own. Teachers must recognize and respect how those differences can influence student learning and relationships. However, this multicultural understanding is particularly vital and foundational to teachers of English language learners.

In her book *Language and Culture* (1998), Claire Kramsch explains that language and culture are intimately connected in three ways: language expresses cultural reality, language embodies cultural reality, and language symbolizes cultural reality (p. 3). Therefore, our culture influences not only how we use and understand language, but also how we make sense of the world. Even if two people from different cultures are speaking the same language, there may still be miscommunication and misunderstanding due to cultural expectations. For example, while an American speaking Chinese may feel the need to say “thank you” as a marker of politeness or gratitude, native Chinese speakers may interpret this phrase as signifying social distance and unnecessary formality (Fallows, 2015). The culture influences the use and interpretation of the words. When seeking to build relationships with students with a different cultural and linguistic background, it is important to remember that culture influences how they interpret words and actions.

Educational norms around the world are different as well. For example, while students in the United States may expect a level of familiarity or even friendship with their teachers, Chinese students may view teachers with more distance and reverence which “reflects a respect for hierarchy and authority” (Wang & Du, 2014, p. 448). A Chinese student and an American teacher may have a different interpretation of what constitutes positive relationships based on cultural assumptions. Teachers must be aware and sensitive to the cultural influences when seeking to building positive relationships with students in cross-cultural settings.

Perception. In light of the context, environment, and culture teachers and students may experience the same relationship, but interpret it differently (Lewis, 2001). This difference in perception is important because our perception influences our experiences and reality. Teachers must “learn how to communicate in such a manner that students will perceive that he or she cares

about them” (McCrosky, 1992 as cited in Teven and McCroskey, 1996, p. 1). Student perception plays a vital role in the development of teacher-student relationships. Students notice both verbal and nonverbal communication cues from teachers that influence their perception of how the teacher cares for them. In order for students to have a positive perception, teachers need to communicate “empathy, understanding, and responsiveness” (McCrosky, 1992 as cited in Teven and McCroskey, 1996, p. 2). Teachers can practice the communication of caring to enhance the perception of positive relationships even if they are unable to deeply connect with each and every student.

Applications in the VIPKid Classroom. The VIPKid classroom remains a unique educational setting. As in the ESL classroom, the educational goals include the learning of English language skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. There are also content objectives in math, science, and social studies based on U.S. Common Core standards as one would find in the mainstream K-12 classroom setting. This means that the students, particularly in higher proficiency levels, are “not only learning English as a subject but are learning through it as well” (Gibbons, 2003, p. 247). The main goal, however, is to learn to use English to speak about these other topics.

VIPKid uses a flipped classroom model so that “classroom time can be used for engaging in activities, discussing concepts, clarifying hard-to-understand information, and investigating questions related to content” (Basal, 2015, p. 29). This model facilitates student-centered class time in which teachers can focus on the needs of the student. If a student is prepared for class and is capable of completing the lesson in less than the allotted 25 minutes, teachers can encourage discussion, play games, or ask questions about the student’s life. These activities can give the

student opportunities to practice conversation skills while also allowing the teacher to make better personal connections.

Unlike some online educational contexts, live video feed of both teacher and student during class allow for better interaction. Teachers are able to use props, pictures and physical movements to help create meaning and share experiences. These visual aids can be used to both teach content objectives and help create connections with the students (Strickland, Keat, & Marinak 2010). The chat box feature also helps teachers to provide text to as visual scaffolding during lessons.

The linguistic and cultural barriers present in this context as well as the mode of distance learning are obvious impediments to building relationships with students. VIPKid teachers must find ways to engage and connect with students despite these barriers. Creating a classroom environment that in which the teacher is focused, patient, and intentional with teaching and feedback is one way to overcome such barriers. Teachers can also affect a student's perception by using non-verbal cues such as smiling and gesturing.

Another variable in the VIPKid context is the issue of time. Each class is only 25-minutes long, so meeting lesson objectives while also working through the language barrier in this short time can be a hindrance to connecting with students. Students are also not always guaranteed the same teacher for every class. Teachers open available slots in their schedules and students' parents book the slots. Depending on the demand for the teacher, her spots may fill quickly before students are able to book reoccurring classes. This lack of guaranteed consistency can be a hindrance to building relationships with students as well. However, even if a teacher only meets with a student once for 25 minutes, she can still practice verbal and non-verbal cues that encourage the student to perceive caring even if no real relationship is formed. This skill is much

needed in this context because students' parents can leave public ratings and feedback about the teacher. If a teacher is unable to communicate care and positivity, they may receive a poor review which can affect their booking rates. Recently, VIPKid has allowed teachers to request reviews of poor ratings. If the teacher achieved the educational objectives, then the rating seems unfairly given, then it can be invalidated. This new policy helps relieve some pressure for teachers as they have the freedom to teach without worrying about negative opinions of parents.

Conclusion

Given the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in other educational contexts, I wanted to explore them in the specific context of VIPKid. While there is an abundance of research on teacher-student relationships in the traditional classroom, the ESL classroom, or the online classroom, for the online ESL context, there is a dearth in research. The proposed research from this study would help to decrease that deficit by exploring the techniques and methods teachers with VIPKid use to build relationships with their students in a one-on-one, ESL, virtual classroom context. For the sake of the more than 30,000 teachers and 200,000 students at VIPKid, researching positive teacher-student relationships in this specific context is a worthwhile pursuit.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research Design

Because the focus of this study was on exploring and understanding the relational experiences of VIPKid teachers, I employed a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is conducted to gather participants' views and experiences in order to better understand a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2015). There were many factors contributing to the building of positive teacher-student relationships and "qualitative research is salient for the understanding of personal, relational, group, organizational, cultural, and virtual contexts in a range of different ways" (Tracy, 2013, p.8). The constructivist approach of grounded theory influenced the research because I wanted to focus on the perceptions and "meanings ascribed by the participants" (Creswell, 2015, p.432). Specifically, I was curious about teachers' beliefs about teacher-student relationships and how those views are applied when working to build positive relationships with their students. The survey conducted for this study focused on VIPKid teachers' perceptions of positive relationships they have with their students. Teacher participants shared experiences of positive relationships including techniques used to build these relationships and barriers that hinder these relationships from forming. They were also asked to share the duration of employment with VIPKid as well as their TESOL qualifications in order to better understand how these qualifications may or may not influence perspectives.

Participants

The participants in this study were teachers who had been teaching for at least 6 months with VIPKid. The sampling was purposeful and homogenous because I intentionally recruited participants "based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics" (Creswell,

2015, p. 207). I chose the defining characteristics of VIPKid teachers who had completed at least one, six-month contract because I wanted to learn from participants with adequate experience in building relationships with students in this context.

As a VIPKid teacher, I have access to online VIPKid teacher communities. In a private Facebook group and on a private discussion board, I obtained permission from administrators to request participants for this study. After exemption approval from the Institutional Review Board at Messiah College, I posted a request in both of these groups for teachers who had completed more than one six-month contract. Initially, 37 teachers responded to the survey. However, I chose to use only 36 survey responses for this study because one participant chose to skip questions I felt were important to the overall study. Each respondent had at least 6 months experience with VIPKid, but some had 2 or more years. Of the 36 participants, 18 had TESOL qualifications of some variety and 18 had none. For the purposes of this paper, participants are referenced by their survey response number.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using a link from SurveyMonkey, the volunteers completed a ten-question survey (see Appendix A). On the SurveyMonkey website, I was able to review the response results. I printed the chosen 36 responses so that I could begin “primary-cycle coding” (Tracy, 2013, p.189). Tracy (2013) describes coding as “the active process of identifying data as belonging to, or representing, some type of phenomenon” (p.189). In this initial phase, I read through all of the responses to gain a general understanding of the information. It was during this reading I realized that one of the participants had skipped questions and I chose not to include these responses in my study. On the second read through, I used different colored highlighters to mark recurring words. I wrote broad, descriptive terms in the margins to begin assigning codes. After

completing the initial reading and coding with paper and pen, I used the search function in Microsoft Word to digitally search for all occurrences of the selected code words. By utilizing this function, I found that some words I initially thought may be important did not occur enough to be significant. Other words were used repetitively amongst participants to convey the same meaning and therefore represented a recurring theme throughout the data. I organized these significant codes in a second Word document including the code word, the participant number, the exact quote, and the question number from the survey. I read through these words and quotes and used them as the foundation on which to expand the words to broader themes. For example, *interests* was a recurring theme, but not every teacher used this word specifically in their responses. Some described connecting with their students by asking about their favorite toys or books, but because they were using their students' interests as a means to build relationships, I included such descriptions under the code word *interests*.

At this point in the analysis, I reviewed my research questions to ensure that the data emerging from the responses and the existing research questions were corresponding. As Tracy (2013) suggests, "throughout the analysis, revisiting research questions and other sensitizing concepts helps you to ensure they are still relevant and interesting" (p. 191). Upon revisiting these questions in light of the data, I found that many teachers spoke of benefits of having positive teacher-student relationships. I did not originally have a research question dedicated to this topic, however, I decided to add another question in order to allow me to explore the perceived benefits and results that teachers mentioned in their responses.

After completing the coding phrases, I then organized categories based on these recurring elements in order to have a better, broad understanding of the views, values, and actions of

VIPKid teachers. I used these categories to explore, organize, and write about the findings of this study.

Chapter IV: Findings

Given the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in other educational contexts, I was curious to better understand the development of these relationships in the relatively new and unique context of VIPKid. As a starting point, I asked if teachers thought relationships with their students were important and asked them to explain why or why not. Unanimously in this survey, 100% of participants agreed that positive teacher-student relationships were important in the context of VIPKid. Some considered positive relationships as necessary to facilitate learning. Others thought of them as an enhancement, encouragement, or motivation for learning better. A few mentioned that positive relationship building was important for teachers to build up and retain a student base. I also asked if teachers thought positive relationships enhanced their teaching as well as the students' learning. Once again, 100% of teachers affirmed their beliefs that positive relationships with their students do influence both their teaching and the student's learning.

These responses affirmed the importance of building positive teacher-student relationships in VIPKid. All participants agreed on the importance of positive relationships and their impact on teaching and learning. However, VIPKid is a distinctive context in which teachers face both challenges and benefits to working to establish positive relationships with their students.

Barriers

As an educational experience for children which incorporates English as a Foreign Language instruction in a live, online context, there can be several barriers that hinder teachers and students from forming positive relationships in this setting. The participants were given a list of common barriers and asked to choose all that apply. This list included: not enough time in

class, lack of recurring classes with the same student, unfamiliarity with students' lives, language barrier, and cultural barrier (see Table 1). There was also space for teachers to choose to write their own ideas about what barriers exist.

Table 1		
<i>Barriers to Creating Positive Teacher-Student Relationships</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage of Responses	Number of Responses
Not enough time in class	61.11%	22
Lack of consistent, recurring classes with the same student	58.33%	21
Unfamiliarity with students' lives	44.44%	16
Language barrier	41.67%	15
Cultural barrier	36.11%	13

Barriers of time. Of the choices given, 22 respondents (61.11%) from this study found that the biggest barrier to building positive relationships with their students was that they did not have enough time in class. Each class is 25-minutes long and this constraint on time can be a barrier in some cases. For example, some students complete the lesson objectives and activities quickly and accurately which leaves time at the end of class to converse, play games, or talk with students about their interests. Other students need the entire 25-minutes to complete the objectives or review difficult content. While the primary goal is English language instruction, many teachers feel that time to connect with their students aids the goal of instruction.

If teachers do not have time to begin building positive relationships in a single class, then the benefit of recurring classes would be helpful. The second most popular choice among these barriers was the lack of consistent, recurring classes with the same student. After choosing this barrier as the only one from the list, one respondent wrote, “all you need is time to build a relationship” (Participant 26). At VIPKid, parents of the students book classes with whichever teacher they choose. Students are not assigned to specific teachers nor are they required to take

all classes with the same teacher. Parents may choose, however, to book the same teacher for their child or they may choose to book classes with several different teachers. Some parents may want to book the same teacher again, but find it too difficult to get a class because popular teacher's schedules fill too quickly. Others may want their child to learn from a variety of teachers with different personalities and teaching styles. As a result, some teachers may only teach a child one time for one lesson. Whatever the reason, 21 participants (58.33%) felt that this inconsistency is a barrier to building relationships with students.

It should be noted that since the survey for this study was conducted, VIPKid has initiated priority booking for students who have had a class with a teacher and would like to continue with that same teacher. The student can request to book another class and the teacher can approve this request. The priority booking function seems to have cut down on the frustration of inconsistent bookings with the same students. With the implementation of this function, students and teachers have been given more control over the number of classes they have with the same teacher. At the time of the survey, one participant spoke to the positive impact of recurring classes, writing:

For my students who have been able to book me regularly, I find the influence of the language and cultural barriers and class times had disappeared as their English has improved. I now know a lot about their lives and enjoy continuing to grow each teacher-student relationship (Participant 34).

Barriers of distance. VIPkid is a distance-learning program that connects teachers in North America with students in China. This distance can create various barriers to building relationships. One barrier related to distance learning was that 44.44% teachers surveyed felt they were unfamiliar with their students' lives which was a hindrance to their relationships. One

participant felt that online learning has an “impersonal nature” (Participant 11). Another stated that “not being able to communicate directly with the family” (Participant 6) was an issue that created a barrier to building relationships. Teachers are able to leave written feedback for parents and parents are able to leave comments for teachers when they review classes; however, this is the extent of communication.

Another barrier that comes with the nature of VIPKid classes through distance education is the inability to “eliminate certain distractions” (Participant 11). Many students take their classes in their homes and generally this goes well; however, being at home means there can be the distractions of siblings, toys, or video games. Well-intentioned parents can cause interference during class as well. One teacher shared that “parents taking over a class can be a barrier” (Participant 18). Parents who want their children to do well in class may interrupt, speak over the child, or give answers before the child has opportunity to respond. VIPKid also has a mobile app, which allows students to take classes anywhere. VIPKid teachers have taught their students in taxis, restaurants, or while on vacation. These distractions can be problematic and interfere with learning.

Barriers of language and culture. Although linguistic and cultural barriers may seem obvious choices when teaching English as a Foreign Language, these barriers were the lowest percentages from this survey. Of the respondents, only 15 (41.67 %) chose language as a barrier and 13 (36.11%) chose culture. One participant stated that “as a teacher, it is up to us to break the cultural barrier” (Participant 23), explaining that teachers can use the cultural differences to help strengthen relationships by allowing students to share their traditions and culture in class.

Teacher Techniques and Actions

Despite the barriers present in building relationships with their students at VIPKid, teachers utilize a variety of techniques and actions to connect with their students. In order to better understand the techniques used to overcome barriers, teacher participants were given the following choices and were asked to check all that apply (see Table 2): correctly pronounce, remember, and often use the student's name; humor, laughter, fun; engaging props and rewards; discussion of student interests and personal life; connection with parents through feedback.

Table 2		
<i>Techniques Used to Build Positive Teacher-Student Relationships</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage of Responses	Number of Responses
Discussion of student interests and personal life	97.22%	35
Humor, laughter, fun	97.22%	35
Correctly pronounce, remember, and often use student's name	91.67%	33
Engaging props and rewards	75.00%	27
Connection with parents through feedback	75.00%	27

For those unfamiliar with VIPKid, the following choices regarding names, props and rewards, and parent feedback have been expounded upon in order to offer a better understanding of how these might help teachers overcome barriers in building relationships.

Names. Teachers agreed that remembering a student's name was important. Many students choose an English name for class, but some keep their Chinese names. It can be difficult for someone who does not speak Chinese to read and pronounce names correctly, but it is one way to connect with the students. Just as with any other relationship, remembering and calling someone by their name shows care.

Props and Rewards. At VIPKid, teachers are encouraged to use props and rewards to engage students. Props are anything that can enhance the lesson or better explain the vocabulary

and objectives. For example, when teaching letters and sounds, a teacher may use alphabet flashcards. Rewards for the students can be stickers, games, or songs. Some teachers simply use high-fives to reward students while others have intricate games they play throughout class. VIPKid has a built-in star reward system in which students can earn a total of 5 virtual stars per class. Although all teachers use them in class, some teachers did not feel that props and rewards were necessary or useful in building relationships with students. One teacher noted that “props don’t have anything to do with building relationships, especially as most teachers reduce the use of props with older students” (Participant 26).

Feedback. Teachers are required to leave feedback for parents after every class. This feedback generally consists of notes about the student performance or suggestions for further practice. Some teachers utilize this feedback in order to better understand student interests. Teachers will leave questions for parents in the feedback and parents will then respond when they leave a review for the class.

Teachers were also given the opportunity to share their own ideas and efforts in overcoming barriers. Many teachers communicated similar themes when describing how they overcome barriers to build relationships with students such as creating a safe and welcoming environment, offering encouragement and support, or incorporating humor and laughter into their lessons.

Safe and welcoming environment. Some teachers emphasized the importance of creating a welcoming and safe learning environment for each student. In order to help guarantee that students are safe in class, all VIPKid teachers must pass background checks. There are also VIPKid employees who monitor classes and assist both students and teachers should any issues arise during class. While VIPKid has these official safety measures in place, teachers were

referring to a different type of safety when they referenced safe environments. For example, one teacher wrote that “students need to feel valued” and know that “the classroom is a safe space to learn and grow” (Participant 22). Many teachers noted the act of simply smiling and having a positive attitude can help create a more welcoming and inviting learning environment. Another teacher commented that “the most important thing a VIPkid teacher can do to build positive relationships with students is to smile” (Participant 17), explaining that a smile can communicate that the teacher is supportive. Some felt that having high enthusiasm and energy during the lesson could facilitate a positive learning environment despite barriers that may exist.

Encouragement and support. Many teachers wrote about the importance of offering encouragement and support while teaching. Again, teachers emphasized smiling as one way to show encouragement and support. Others wrote of patience, gentle correction, and an encouraging attitude. Even if the child makes mistakes, teachers must try to “support their every attempt” (Participant 31) at language learning. Praise and positive reinforcement also help to encourage and support a student’s learning efforts. One teacher wrote about her efforts of encouragement and support by stating, “I try to be empathetic and be their champion” (Participant 32).

Another way in which teachers seek to support their students is by seeking to learn about their students’ lives and interests. Some teachers connect with students simply by asking how their day was and how they are feeling. Many teachers mentioned showing care and concern is a key aspect to building relationships. One teacher stated that “showing genuine interest in the student is key” (Participant 29). Others may bond by introducing their pets and discovering their students are animal-lovers as well. Teachers may ask about favorite toys, foods, or sports to establish a connection. One teacher (Participant 21) suggested that learning about student interest

can not only help teachers and students build relationships, but can also be used to enhance learning by relating material to those student interests. For example, a student could practice naming the colors on his favorite toy or using adjectives to describe that toy.

Humor and laughter. While encouraging smiles can help teachers overcome barriers, humor and laughter can also facilitate positive relationship-building. VIPKid teachers work exclusively with children under the age of 12. This younger student base allows teachers to use silliness as a means of connection. Funny faces, comical voices, or exciting games may help teachers connect with students on a different level. Several teachers mentioned bonding with students by engaging them with humor and fun. Research shows that when humor is used appropriately in the classroom, it can influence teacher-student relationships in a positive way (Van Praag, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2017).

Results and Benefits

Several teachers described the perceived results or benefits of forming positive relationships with their students. When surveyed about the areas that are enhanced by positive teacher-student relationships, the majority of teachers chose student motivation, student attitude, student self-esteem, student language acquisition ability, teacher attitude, teacher motivation, and

Table 3		
<i>Areas Enhanced by Positive Teacher-Student Relationships</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage of Responses	Number of Responses
Student Language Acquisition Ability	100.00%	36
Student Attitude	97.22%	35
Teacher Attitude	97.22%	35
Student Motivation	97.22%	35
Teacher Motivation	94.44%	34
Student Self-esteem	91.67%	33
Teacher Energy	88.89%	32

teacher energy (see Table 3). Along with these given choices, teachers also explained other benefits they believe result from positive relationships with their students.

Comfort and trust. Many VIPKid teachers believe that establishing positive relationships with students can “lead to a more comfortable learning environment for both students and teachers” (Participant 1). Many thought that making a student feel comfortable could increase student learning and language output. As students begin to produce more language in a comfortable environment, this can lead to building trust. Students who trust their teachers are more willing to produce language. Teachers suggested that when students have developed trust, they are willing to make more effort, work harder, and learn faster in the classroom.

Confidence and security. Students who have high levels of comfort and trust in the classroom are more likely to feel safe and develop confidence. One teacher (Participant 24) shared that as a result of a positive relationship, the student felt “safe and confident when learning” in the VIPKid classroom. Others wrote that building confidence is an important way for teachers to facilitate the language acquisition process in their students.

Risk-taking and mistake-making. When students feel safe and confident, they are more prepared to take risks and make mistakes in the language-learning process. Teachers placed high value on the willingness of their students to take risks in their language efforts because it was seen as a means to better language learning. Several teachers mentioned how students learn directly from making mistakes. One teacher told the story of how a student pretended to teach her stuffed animal English by correcting the toy’s mistakes which were similar to mistakes the student had made in previous classes. The student learned from her own mistakes and practiced teaching the correct forms to her toy in class.

Trained or Untrained

The minimum educational requirements for VIPKid teachers is a bachelor's degree in any area. The company looks for teachers who have education experience with children and in TESOL, but there are no formal requirements in either of these areas. Out of the 36 participants in this survey, exactly half had some form of TESOL training and the other half did not. Training ranged from ESL classroom experience or internships to online certificates to graduate degrees. Despite the even sampling and variety of training, I could not find any indication that level of training significantly informed views on building positive relationships with students. All teachers agreed on the importance and influence of positive teacher-student relationships and, while there were different perspectives on technique, emphasis, or experiences, these variations did not seem dependent upon training. As Nel Noddings (2012) wrote, "Every human life starts in relation, and it is through relations that a human individual emerges." (p.771). All of the teacher participants understood the importance of positive relationships with their students and tried to achieve these relationships not because it is exclusively important in the field of TESOL, but because it is ubiquitously significant to humankind.

Chapter V: Implications of the Study

Despite different opinions, experiences, and training, all the teachers surveyed for this study agreed that positive relationships with their students were extremely important and that these relationships have benefits to both the teacher and student. There are certain barriers that exist to forming these relationships, but VIPKid teachers work hard to overcome them and connect with their students in meaningful and positive ways. As a result of this study, there are some implications for both teachers working with VIPKid, and the staff at the main office of VIPKid.

Overcoming barriers. One of the biggest barriers that teachers felt hindered them from building positive relationships with students was that of time. Whether it was not enough time in class or not enough recurring classes with the same student, teachers felt that more time with students would better facilitate building relationships. Since the survey was conducted, VIPKid has made efforts in allowing students and teachers to keep consistent classes by allowing the priority booking feature which was discussed earlier in this paper. This function has the potential to help teachers overcome the lack of consistent classes with the same student which many felt was a barrier.

Barriers that come with distance education were also mentioned. Because teachers do not have direct lines of communication with the parents, many have joined the Chinese social media platform WeChat. VIPKid does not officially support or encourage this connection as they cannot be held responsible for misconduct on behalf of the parents or teachers involved. However, in light of this disconnection with parents being seen as a barrier, VIPKid should consider a better method for teachers and parents to communicate. It could be as simple as parents filling out a questionnaire about the students' interests, goals, and learning styles. This

simple form of communication would give a basis on which teachers could begin building relationships even within the confine of a short, 25-minute class period.

Although language and culture is a potential barrier in any English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, VIPKid already does an excellent job offering linguistic and cultural educational opportunities for their teachers. Through the use of videos and articles provided by VIPKid, teachers have been given opportunities to learn about the language, history, and culture of China. As some teachers mentioned in this study, teachers can take advantage of the culture and language difference by giving the students opportunities to share. The student can become the teacher and share their expertise on Chinese language and culture during class as time and lessons allow.

Applying techniques. The overarching theme presented by teachers for actively pursuing positive relationships with students was care for the student. Teachers showed care in a variety of ways such as creating a welcoming and safe class environment, offering encouragement and support to the student, and using humor and laughter during class.

Some teachers employed simple techniques such as remembering and using the students name and lots of smiles. These techniques are easy to apply, but can have a great impact on making a student feel welcome and cared for. Teachers also used props and rewards with students, although some did not feel this had any bearing on relationships.

Seeking to learn more about the students' interests and lives was a technique that many teachers felt was profitable for building relationships. Some teachers utilized feedback to ask the parents to share the students' favorite things. Knowing students' interests helped teachers to have a foundation to begin relationships, but it was also applied in the classroom to help better engage

students in learning during the lessons. VIPKid could be more proactive in helping teachers obtain this knowledge by encouraging parents to share.

Working toward results. The data collected for this study was based solely on teacher perception and experience. It is significant that 100% of teachers surveyed thought that their students' language acquisition ability was enhanced by having positive relationships with teachers. In fact, most teachers agreed that positive relationships with the students had a variety of benefits for the teachers and students (see Table 3). Whether or not students agree with these benefits is beyond the scope of this study, but because the teachers surveyed received benefit from connecting with students, other teachers should be motivated to build these positive relationships as well. Teachers bear the weight of this responsibility to build relationships with their students. While the task can be daunting in this context, teachers can be encouraged to practice communicating care in the classroom. Smiles, enthusiasm, and seeking to understand student interests are simple ways to begin building positive relationships with students. It would be helpful for VIPKid to continue to listen and partner with teachers in order to help them build relationships with their students. Teachers should share their concerns and suggestions with the company in order to improve teacher-student relationships in this context. Teachers can also encourage one another by reminding each other of the importance of the relationships with students and sharing ideas for communicating care.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted to better understand positive teacher-student relationships from the perspectives of the teachers. All responses of this study were in writing from the teachers. The researcher did not view the teachers applying any techniques during their classes and did not observe the nature of any relationships with the students. No information was gathered from the students for this study. Although teachers may feel their efforts toward building positive relationships with their students are successful, there was no evidence collected in this study to confirm those efforts were well-received by the students.

The teacher participants all work within the context of VIPKid. The results are representative of teachers' perspectives in this specific context. These results may be influenced by company environment, policy, or training. In this context, all of the students are Chinese. Therefore, the findings of this study reference building relationships with Chinese students. Teachers who work in online EFL contexts with a different company or with students from different countries may have varying perspectives on building relationships with students.

Future Recommendations for Study

In order to build on this study and corroborate the findings, it would be beneficial to conduct a study on student perspectives about positive relationships with their teachers. VIPKid teachers could better understand what practices actually make students feel supported, encouraged, and valued by listening to the students' voices. The students' perspectives are just as important as the teachers' as both parties should feel that the relationship is a positive one. It may also be beneficial to observe actual VIPKid classes in which students and teachers both feel a positive relationship has been established. By observing the actions and responses of students, a

researcher could corroborate and add to teacher perspectives about how to build positive relationships with students.

In order to explore contributing factors to perspectives in building relationships with students in other online EFL contexts, studies conducted with teachers from a different company would add to the body of research. It would also be gainful to study how teachers in similar online EFL contexts build relationships with students from countries other than China. Future studies could help determine if the perspectives of teachers on building positive teacher-student relationships found in this study are confined to this specific context.

Personal Impact of the Study

As a student of TESOL and a VIPKid teacher, I was curious about the perspectives of other teachers on building relationships with their students. I conducted this study for both professional and personal benefit. I was encouraged to learn that teachers who participated, both trained and untrained, unanimously agreed that positive relationships with their students are important. These findings supported the abundance of research that shows that positive teacher-student relationships do matter in education.

I was also able to grow in my own understanding of relationships with my students as well as apply some of the techniques suggested by other teachers. It can be easy in this fast-paced, distance-learning context to be focused on getting through the content of that 25-minute class period and moving on to the next without being intentional to connect with the student. This study was a wonderful reminder for me to find ways to intentionally communicate care for each of my students in every class. I appreciated the simple advice, such as giving students lots of encouraging smiles, that could be immediately applied in class. I have always enjoyed my

students, but this study was an encouragement to be purposeful in viewing my students as people who should be valued and cared for and not simply taught and assessed.

Summary

In order to better understand the perceptions of VIPKid teachers about building positive relationships with their students, I conducted a survey in which 36 teachers responded. Teachers answered questions about their views on positive relationships, barriers to positive relationships, and techniques for building positive relationships in the context of VIPKid. All teachers surveyed understood the importance of positive teacher-student relationships. Teachers had different opinions on which barriers exist to building those relationships and how to overcome them. Teachers shared a variety of thoughts on engaging students in order to build relationships, but most responses centered on communicating care for the student. For the last question on the survey, I asked teachers to share what they felt was the most important thing a VIPKid teacher could do in order to build positive relationships with their students. I have incorporated many of those ideas throughout this report, but one response seemed to summarize consensus: “Show a genuine interest in the students. Be caring, attentive, and thoughtful. Treating the students like they are individuals and not just one of the many you have to teach that week makes all the difference.” (Participant 35). Regardless of the potential barriers they may face, this advice can surely help VIPKid teachers build positive relationships with their students.

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Appendix A

Positive Teacher-Student Relationships Survey

1. How long have you been teaching with VIPKID?
 - a. 6-12 months (2nd contract)
 - b. 12-18 months (3rd contract)
 - c. 18-24 months (4th contract)
 - d. More than 2 years (5th + contract)
2. Are you trained or certified in TESOL? Is so, please list training or certification.
3. Do you feel that positive relationships with students are important? Why or why not?
4. Do you believe that positive teacher-student relationships enhance your teaching and the students' learning in this context? Why or why not?
5. Have you seen a student improve or perform better after a positive connection was made with you, the teacher? Please share your story.
6. In your experience, positive teacher-student relationships can improve (check all that apply):
 - a. Student motivation
 - b. Student attitude
 - c. Student self-esteem
 - d. Student language acquisition ability
 - e. Teacher attitude
 - f. Teacher motivation
 - g. Teacher energy
 - h. Other

7. What techniques or methods do you use to build positive relationships with your students? Mark all that apply.

- a. Correctly pronounce, remember, and often use the student's name
- b. Humor, laughter, fun
- c. Engaging props and rewards
- d. Discussion of student interests and personal life
- e. Connection with parents through feedback

8. What barriers to creating positive relationships with students exist in this online context?

Mark all that apply.

- a. Language barrier
- b. Cultural barrier
- c. Not enough time in class
- d. Unfamiliarity with students' lives
- e. Lack of consistent, recurring classes with the same student
- f. Other

9. What efforts have you made to overcome barriers in order to connect with students?

Please share your experience.

10. What do you feel is the most important thing a VIPKID teacher can do to build positive relationships with students?

Survey Monkey Link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/YZ2HRDN>

Appendix B

Picture 1: Following an assessment, a regular student shared a video of himself playing the piano. You can see my shock as I watched him skillfully play Für Elise. I had no idea he played piano until his until this moment.

Picture 2: A student shared her favorite book in English which happened to be one of my favorites as well.